

Best practices in the European Sales Competition 2015

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<p>This study presents the best practices in the European Sales Competition held for the second time in Belgium, June 2015. European Sales Competition (ESC) is for University students around Europe to compete in business negotiation skills. The competition is a simulation of a business-to-business (B2B) meeting in a buyer-seller interaction.</p> <p>This thesis is made as a commission for Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences who organizes the upcoming competition in 2016 in Helsinki. The aim of the competition is to improve the attitude towards professional selling and providing the students an opportunity to show their skills in business negotiations.</p> <p>The research is made based on the narrators own experiences, interviews, performance observations and business academic literature. The theoretical part of the thesis explores the sales meeting process, negotiation techniques and cultural differences in business etiquette and behaviour. In order to understand and communicate with people from other nationalities it is also important to be aware of your personal competences and standards of activity. Since sales takes place between people, not companies, the interpersonal skills are valuable, both in the meeting as well as during the preparation for the competition.</p> <p>The empirical part presents the experience of the competition day from the narrators' perspective. Two finalists' interviews from the competition in 2014 and 2015 supports the narrative outcomes. The other view of the competition and evaluation is given by a judge to get a versatile research.</p> <p>The study is collected to a guide of the best practises of the European Sales Competition. It gives practical examples how to prepare for the competition day and what are the key factors in the sales meeting process.</p> <p>The coaching period and participating in the competition is a demanding project considering the time frame and international aspects, but it's a once in a lifetime opportunity to show ones business skills in front of a jury consisting of sales professionals. The final price for the competitor is not to win the competition but to have the opportunity to meet company delegates, widen the professional network and improving own business negotiation skills.</p>	
Keywords ESC, sales meeting process, CQ, SPIN, business etiquette	

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1 Introduction

European Sales Competition is a once in a lifetime opportunity. During ones' career there's not many possibilities to show your competences in front of a jury consisting of high level business delegates and sales professionals. These professionals are interested to hire and find potential to work for them in the future as well as improving their brand image. The European Sales Competition was held in 2015 the second time with students competing from different Business Schools around Europe.

This thesis will provide the reader a guide to understand the core competences for succeeding in the European Sales Competition, including practical advice for the preparation, competition day and the sales meeting.

This study will introduce you to the customs of a sales meeting as well as giving a practical manual for the European Sales Competition. The guide will both give insight on business meeting processes and practical advice how to succeed in the competition. The conclusion part provides the outcomes and best practises to success in the competition. Sales and business is all about communication.

1.1 European Sales Competition

European Sales Competition gathers together several business schools from Europe together to compete in business negotiation skills. The goal of the ESC is to rise the appreciation of professional sales, learn necessary sales skills in a multicultural environment and to learn the concept of selling at a European level. The competition is a simulation of a business-to-business (B2B) meeting in a buyer -seller interaction. Students' personal selling skills are put into a test by evaluating how well the meeting is performed. (ESC manual 2015, 4.)

The competition takes place each year in May or June after the national competitions which are held in spring. The most successful students take part in the ESC after the national competitions. The schools can however choose themselves who they are going to send to the competition. Most schools send their best performed competitors from the national competition. In Finland the competitors are chosen through the European Sales Competition coaching training before the competition. (Hautamäki 16.11.2015)

European Sales Competition gives a possibility to the students to show and improve their business skills when the companies have the opportunity to meet and recruit students who are about to graduate. (ESC manual 2015, 4.) Participants from the previous years have got several job opportunities direct after the competition (Tuohimaa 17.11.2015).

The first competition took place in Belgium with 11 participants in June 2014. It was a pilot competition of few Universities to begin with the work to get professional sales in headlines. The organizing party consisted of four European universities including Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences (Finland), Turun Ammattikorkeakoulu (Finland), Vlerick business School (Belgium) and University of Applied Sciences in Wiener Neustadt (Austria). Their goal is to spread knowledge of selling as a profession and give networking opportunities both to students and companies. (European Sales Competition 2015.)

The competition is sponsored always by a company whose product is displayed and sold in the competition by the competitors. The fact that service or product to be sold is real and offered by a business partner makes the sales negotiation, the need of the customer and solution apparently truthful (Vallila 16.11.2015.). In 2015 the main sponsor was Oracle for the second time and the product was their Social Sourcing Tool. It's part of Oracle's HR cloud services and Talent Acquisition which means the competitor had to have

an idea of the whole product family. An intangible product requires more base study and an understanding of the details since the product was a cloud based and technical solution. The main objective was to sell only Oracles Social Sourcing tool, but secondary, to include also other services in the offer. (Alhonen 4.2015)

1.2 Research subject and objectives

The subject of this research is to make a guide to answer the question what are the core competences needed in the European Sales Competition. The competitors need to manage the sales meeting interaction in an international context which requires a well prepared strategy.

The participants are provided with a lot of information which needs to be analysed and used meaningfully during the sales meeting. This might be frustrating when the time is limited and the product to be sold is a complex business case. The guide "The best practices in the European Sales Competition" indicates the key success factors to make an effective meeting plan and how to prepare to the competition.

The author has been in the second held European Sales Competition in 2015 and wants to share the best practices to succeed and manage the 'big day'. The objective of this thesis is to give practical advice for the competitors training to the European Sales Competition. The product provides the readers explicit knowledge about the competition which couldn't be found in the European Sales Competition material. The advices are collected to a nine step guide which can be used in the future European Sales Competition trainings. The guide is for anyone who wants to take part in the competition as a competitor or is otherwise interested in international sales.

The authors' personal goal of choosing this topic was to help other students in the demanding competition challenge. That consists of professional sales and meeting process management skills as well as personal competences. The idea was to reinforce her CV by this study in terms of developing an international career after the graduation. This study wants encourage soon to be graduated students to take part in this "leave it or take it" opportunity.

1.3 Content structure

This research is divided in the theoretical part, the empirical part with interviews and the narrative as well as the discussion and follow-on research ideas.

The theoretical section introduces the sales meeting process in general, questioning techniques and the cultural aspects to take into consideration in a business meeting. Business etiquette, national differences in communication and negotiation skills are essential in terms of succeeding in the competition. Moreover, the competitor has to master the meeting process and lead the discussion professionally to a closure. Sales techniques, such as the SPIN model is explained in this chapter.

The empirical part gives a view on the preparation process, the sales meeting simulation from the narrators' point of view. It is followed by the interviews of two awarded finalists from year 2014 and 2015 as well as thoughts from the jury. This section provides real life examples of how to manage the preparation period, what kind of material is good to have to hand and general information about the competition.

The fourth chapter presents the implementation of the thesis. The product sums the preparation process and gives practical advices to manage the competition. The discussion chapter evaluates the reliability and validity of the research outcome and the usability of the product manual. This section proposes few follow-on research questions and evaluates the writers learning experience during the thesis process.

1.4 Comissioner

The best practices in the European Sales Competition 2015 is made as a commission for Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences. The European Sales Competition is founded in cooperation with four European Universities including Turku University of Applied Sciences, Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences, Vlerick Business School and University of Applied Sciences in Wiener Neustadt.

The European Sales Competition was organized for the second time in 2015 with 27 business students competing in the best sales meeting performance. Now there were 14 Universities around Europe which participated in the competition held in Brussels. (European Sales Competition 2015d.)

By the competition Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences' goal is to inspire both students and global professionals to work within sales and recruit these students. Also Haaga-Helia University has close links to the business community and want to facilitate and help develop a curriculum that is practically relevant and academically rigorous.

In 2015 the competition was organized in Belgium and next year 2016 it will take place in Helsinki, Finland. Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences will be the host organizer in 2016 putting effort to develop the competition to the next level. (European Sales Competition 2015.)

1.5 Key concepts

ESC: stands for the European Sales Competition. The competition simulates a business-to-business (B2B) meeting in a seller-buyer interaction. Participants are business students from different Universities in Europe. (ESC 2015c, 4.)

Sales meeting process: describes the procedure how a sales meeting is accomplished. A sales meeting is held to build relationships, identify the needs and the benefits for the customer and sell the product (Investopedia 2015).

SPIN: is a widely taught selling technique developed by Neil Rackham in 1988 (Rackham 1996, 4).

Business etiquette: expected behaviors and expectations for individual actions in business. (BusinessDictionary 2015.)

CQ: stands for Cultural Intelligence. It is an individual capability which can be enhanced by training and cultural assessments. CQ improves effectiveness and reduces attrition in culturally diverse situations. (The Cultural Intelligence Center 2015.)

2 Business to Business sales

Business to Business sales, in short B2B indicates sales made to businesses rather than to consumers. It often take the form of one company selling products or services to another. (About money 2015.) This chapter will introduce the steps of a sales meeting which is an important part of the business to business sales process.

2.1 The sales meeting process

The meeting process can be divided in different phases. Depending on the partition the sales meeting process can consist of four, five or even more parts. The sales meeting includes at least the introduction, needs identification, the presentation phase and the closing phase.

There's a brief structure which can be followed to obtain a good solution in a business meeting. The following Figure 1 show the process of a typical sales meeting. Each stage is essential for a sales representative when preparing for a meeting with especially a new client. (Rackham 1996, 37.)



Pic 1. ESC (26.).

The sales meeting needs always to be prepared. That means the seller has to do his homework in order to reach his goals and earn the trust of the customer. It depends also on the state of the customer relationship how the meeting should be prepared. A first meeting is an opening; it about getting to know each other and developing the trust, when in the next meetings the discussion can be deepened and the focus is on proceeding in the decision making. The key is to listen and ask the right questions since sales calls with more questions are more successful than sales meetings without (Business Network Australia 2011).

Further the buying process has changed in the past years and the customers have to hand a lot more information than before. That is also why the customers already have an opinion of the company who's selling before the actual sales meeting. Nowadays the buy-

ers make more research in advance and are aware what's on the market. (Business Network Australia 2011). The value presented has to be based on the real needs of the customer since the customers are professionals in their own field (Rackham 2012).

2.1.1 First contact and introduction

In business you are expected to fill a "role" as in other situations in life. Nevertheless there is no such thing as a "right model" for opening a meeting. The choice of words and how to approach your sales partner depends on the context, the personality and the relationship that you have. (Palmer 2013, 37.)

As Keith Eades states in his book Collaborative Sale (64.), people turn to evaluate brands in their buying process all the time. Professional sales representatives doesn't only represent their organization but they are also able to create their own individual brand to customers. A strong brand is considered more trustworthy in terms of quality; customers at least think they know what they are getting by buying a well-established brand. What the seller is personally known for is his brand. The founder of Amazon.com said: "Your brand is what people say about you when you are not in the room" (Royston 2016).

Introduction phase consists of the first minutes in the meeting when the salesperson and the customer encounter. The first impression might pre-determine the outcome of the sales meeting. The success of the sale is affected by how the business relation starts, how the meeting is managed, what kind of "feeling" the customer gets and does he feel that he can trust the salesperson. The customer builds his impression about the seller in approximately four seconds and the final judgement is finalized in about 30 seconds. (Tracy 2013.)

Especially when meeting a new client for the very first time it is important to pay attention to a clear presentation and an appropriate business look. A handshake and eye contact during the introduction phase is common in European countries. (ESC 29-30.) The handshake is better to be firm instead of too soft in order to give a positive first impression. You can choose do you want to give an ineffective or professional image of yourself. (Acevedo 2015.) A friendly and positive appearance helps building trust between the salesperson and the customer. A polite behaviour is important to carry through the meeting even though the customer wouldn't react the same way. Adapt to the customers behaviour and ask for permission to sit down. (ESC 29-30.) Building hope and positivity is necessary to obtain a mutual decision. (McDonnel 2014, 139.)

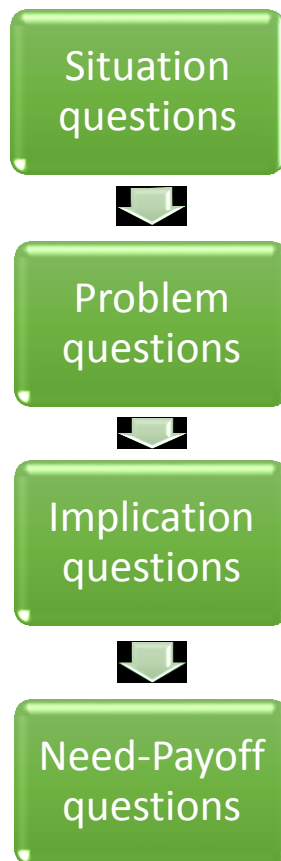
Two distinct but complementary skills are required to start a meeting effectively. One of them is to define a concrete goal for the meeting in a way that will maximize the chances of the meeting to be productive. In terms of results obtained so that it will have a positive impact on the relationship. The second and maybe more important skill is to announce the goal in a manner that is comfortable and which will ensure that the other person starts the meeting in a curious, open, positive and receptive state of mind. (Palmer 2013, 40.)

Small talk is part of the introduction and getting to know each other. The importance of the small talk varies between task-focused and relationship-focused cultures. In Northern European countries the customer is usually not interested in long small talk when in contrast Central- and South Europeans value it highly. (Passport to trade 2014.) Certain topics such as income and religion are not recommended small talk topics when trying to build trust with the customer. The sales representative should gain a commitment to continue to the next phase by a smooth transition. (ESC 30.)

2.1.2 Needs identification

In order to clarify the needs of the client there's one widely used technique called SPIN. The SPIN is a widely used selling technique in sales meetings around Europe. It is developed by Neil Rackham in 1988 and is now a popular method for identifying customer needs. This technique helps to assess the needs of the customer and further to tailor the presentation to the needs of the client. SPIN stands for Situation -, Problem -, Implementation - and Need-Payoff questions. When the technique is applied correctly it enables to obtain a clear overview of the customer's situation. (Rackham 1996, 50-51.)

The needs identification is an essential phase of the meeting because the customer is telling about his situation and problems which needs to be solved. It is up to the salesperson how much information he gets and how he use it in the product presentation. The questions should be well planned and in a logical order so that the conversation proceeds smoothly. (ESC 32) The salesperson has to learn to ask the right questions and listen the customer. And not only what the seller asks matters but how the questions are asked. (Helsingin Sanomat 2015.)



Picture 2. SPIN questions. (Rackham 1996, 49)

In order to make relevant questions the salesperson needs to have a good understanding of the customer's business. There is no idea to ask information which can be found on the homepage or be studied otherwise. The base idea of the SPIN method is to get information about the customer's current situation, get him involved and to understand what challenges he's got and that it is urgent to make something about the circumstances. The salesperson has to in this phase already give hints why your solution would be best for the customer. The seller should lead the meeting in the needs identification part so that he gets an idea is the customer ready to buy or is some more time or discussion needed (McDonnel 2014, 138.) Asking the SPIN questions is a process of shared understanding and exploration focused on the buyer's needs, problems and wants. (Rackham 1996, 68)

Asking questions reveal gaps in the asker's knowledge and there again gives the other part place to describe his priorities and situation. And by understanding the needs of the

customer reveals mutual trust, which again is grounded on shared information and will be used to identify mutually beneficial opportunities. All over the world the trust appears to mean the same but it's valued higher in some countries than others. This means it might be easier to build trust in some parts of the world (Brett 2014, 55).

Communication seems to be understood more as speaking and reacting when in reality the skill to be quiet and listen is more important. By giving the other person the space to speak and tell about his situation it gives the seller the opportunity to actually get a lot more information than by talking yourself. Negotiation requires the right technique and approach to be accepted by the receiving party. For instance the following behaviours are examples of inattentive listening habits. (Schwartz, 2006. 21.)

- Interrupting
- Trying to finish the other one's thoughts
- Lack of eye contact
- Slouching
- Talking too much without pausing or waiting for a response
- Crossed arms

These methods give an impression that the other one doesn't care or do not show respect. Schwartz explicate that a good listener on the other hand utilizes empathetic or supportive words in his speaking (e.g. "I understand", "okay", "go on", "okay" etc.). The positioning towards the discussion partner is inviting and depending on the circumstances the hands rest open. Smile and eye contact is part of the communication and shows the other party of interest. (Schwartz, 2006. 21.)

The S stands for situational questions. These questions are for getting to know the customer's current business situation and to understand what is going to happen in the future. They are necessary since they relieve facts and it's a step for the customer and the salesperson to get to know each other. Successful salespersons do ask only few situation questions because they already know the basic information of the customer and don't waste the time in asking irrelevant questions. (Rackham 1996, 76)

P displays problem questions which will help you to uncover the difficulties, problems and dissatisfactions in the customer's current situation. This requires planning in order to find out what the customer is looking for. By asking problem based questions you should be able to find out the core needs of the customer. (ESC 2015a, 33.) Salespeople with less experience tend to ask less problem questions than the more experienced sellers. Professionals do also ask these questions earlier in the meeting. The aim is to get the customer

to say “yes” and discover themselves that they have a place to improve. (Business Network Australia 2011.)

I is for implication questions which discuss the effects of the problem and develops the need of acting rapidly to solve the problem. In this point customer is encouraged to tell about their needs in detail. As well these questions are supposed to involve the customer to realise his needs and problems in his business. These questions deepens the pain and understanding of the problem. (Business Network Australia 2011). An implication question asks about the effects, implications or consequences of the buyer’s situation. Huthwaite’s research states that implication questions are strongly related to success in larger sales. They are a powerful needs development tool especially when selling to decision makers. (Rackham 1996, 76)

N stands for need-payoff questions. The purpose of these questions is to make the customer concentrate on the payoff of a solution instead of a problem. The aim is to get the buyer to tell the benefits of the solution instead of the salesperson. These questions are helpful, constructive and positive because they focus on the solution. Need-payoff questions move the discussion forward towards commitment and action. (Rackham 1996, 128.) Better, it could also be named as the value questions since these questions ask how the solution would help the customer or how their business would benefit from the solution the salesperson is offering. The goal is that the customer articulates himself how his life would be easier by buying the solution. (Business Network Australia 2011).

When talking about the challenges the customer needs to improve in their business there’s two ways of expressing it. Others’ speak about “challenges” and other salespersons’ are more straightforward and talks about “problems”. The more proper way is to speak about challenges when discussing about the pain points of the buyer. (Hautamäki 16.11.2015).

When having a meeting with a customer it is important to make sure who are the decision makers. It is a waste of everyone’s time trying to close the deal with a person who’s not actually having the rights to make the decision. A person who’s the decision maker might be obvious or an opinion leader. It could disturb the salesperson’s process in achieving the sale if the actual decision maker hear the solution conveyed from a second hand source (McDonnel 2014, 138).

2.1.3 Presentation Phase

The presentation path is the heart of the sales meeting process. That's the arena where the seller's skills of selling are put to the test and the sale. The reasons for having the presentation can be explained as follows:

"The aim of presenting is to ensure a good customer experience so that the customer is willing to take action, that is, to purchase your product. You do this through adopting a specific methodology of exploring your customer's needs, matching them with your product and getting a decision from your customer to purchase. Ensuring a good customer experience involves certain attitudes and practices from you." (McDonnel 2014, 137).

A successful presentation requires ability to engage the customer into the presentation. The presentation should be based on the aspects found in the needs identification phase. As well, the salesperson must have a solid knowledge about the product and present the solution based on the customer type. (ESC 35-36.) While doing the presentation it helps to engage the audience or the negotiation partner if you use storytelling to describe the solution. Making the presentation visual and using verbal tools helps the customer to understand the key points. Talking is one tool in presenting but it becomes more effective and understandable if the salesperson involves also hand gestures, body language and facial expressions to the product presentation. This will help to connect with the buyer when the presentation phase is well prepared. (Antonio 2014.)

Either the customer is interested is it going help them reduce cost, time or productivity or improve their business effectivity in some other way. You should avoid getting caught up in the details but in the other hand have all the relevant facts at your fingertips. Some customers prefer a visual presentation and others want the information to be spoken to them. Sometimes a stylish appearance might be more meaningful to the customer than your description of the product's efficiency. You should adapt to the customers style and desires so you could get a closed sale. (McDonnel 2014, 139).

Also last minute changes can occur which means that the salesperson needs to be proactive and adapt the presentation and the meeting in general to the person he's discussing with. In thinking of cultural aspects, some nationalities needs a common agreement before making the decision though the manager in charge will give the last word. (McDonnel 2014, 138).

In order to let the customer see the advantages that your product will bring or the problems which can be avoided by buying the product, it might be necessary to investigate an

area that is problematic for the customer. It shouldn't in any case be presented in a threatening way even if it will show the importance of your product and the need for quick action. (McDonnel 2014, 143) People expect to be educated by the salesperson about the product and learn how to use it (Denny 2009, 99.).

Detailed product information is essential for the salesperson but not for the customer. In depth technical information is good to be aware of but the buyer doesn't buy the product itself but the solution. (Denny 2009, 98.) The anticipated outcomes would then be that the customer wants your product and is going to buy it, in that case you have achieved your goal: they have a product they will enjoy and you have a sale. A satisfied customer aims for a returning customer and new referrals further new sales. (McDonnel 2014, 137)

A presentation shouldn't ever be improvised to not be in the situation of missing some important information. Also in talking about a business meeting with a person from a different culture it is important to know the behavioural habits of the customer. The salesperson should make a comprehensive research about the product, the competitors and especially the customer in order to have a successful sale. Presenting is a research activity to get the understanding of the customers' state of mind and regarding their need of the product. (McDonnel 2014, 138.)

Identifying the unique sales points will help to present the solution to the buyer. Every business, solution and product should be unique to the competitors. The salesperson has to do the homework to be able to the customer. Many businesses think they need to be the cheapest which isn't correct. Statistics shows that only 18-20 % of people buy the most cheap solution and 0,5 % will always buy the most expensive one. It depends of the criteria and values of the customer. It is good to explain the customer what the customer achieves by buying the product and due to the thought price the salesperson can be proud of it. (Denny 2009,)

2.1.4 Handling objections

The objections has to be discussed properly to be able to continue the sales conversation. Otherwise they will later be a barrier in closing the sales. (Helsingin Sanomat 2015.) Objections can be anything from the price to supplying times or product details. It depends on the case, circumstances and the customer what he might ask or say as an argument. In this chapter are presented the most common objections what might occur during the sales meeting. There's mainly five reasons why customers won't buy. Victor Antonio in his video "How to close a sale" explains what these objections are. In a nut scale if there's

no money, time, need, urgency or trust the sale will be hard to close. So how to overcome these objections?

The objections can be verbal but the body language is probably even more describing than what the customer explains you in words. The customer's mood or concern can be seen in his position and gesture or as a manner when you are talking about a certain subject. Take appropriate action if you notice any sign of impatience, irritation or boredom. For instance you can try to change the subject or lead the conversation to another direction. (McDonnell 2014, 139.) The body can't lie and if the customer says one thing but the body reacts another way it means that the salesperson has to stay alert. Then it is better to trust and study the body language. (Helsingin Sanomat 2015.)

Many customers say they don't have the money to buy. A percentage do not but most of the people actually have the resources to buy. It is the salesperson's job to show the value why it would be the best choice for the client. Some customers might come up with that they don't have any time. This is an excuse which can be overcome if there's a way to save money and therefore they will organize the time to do that. (Antonio 2013)

Customers might know exactly what they want in detail. Then there is the majority who don't know what the need and that's where the seller needs to make them aware of this need. In some cases the customer thinks the buying process is not urgent. The salesperson has to find the ways to explain why it is important to take action now. Is the customer going to lose an opportunity, money or time if they don't do the decision right away? It is good to make the buying party feel that the situation is urgent. The salesperson should show them the "pain" of not buying instead of only presenting features. (Antonio 2013)

If the customer still rejects to buy it is important to analyse why the customer doesn't buy. If it is not about the money, time, urgency nor need it might be that the customer doesn't trust the salesperson. The big picture might be unclear and the client doesn't think that either the product or the salesperson can help him. (Antonio 2013)

Needs related objections:

- These objections occur when the customer thinks (or feels) he doesn't need the sellers' product. It might also be a matter of values or learned behaviours what the customer doesn't want to change: "We have always done it this way" or "We haven't ever done it like that". (Denny 2009, 161, 163.)

Product related objections:

- Objections related to the product can concern the fact that the customer hasn't understood what the product is about and needs more information about it or that the customer doesn't like the product or service features. (ESC 2015, 22-23.)

Source related objections:

- An objection related to the source can be expressed either verbally or with body language (McDonnell 2014, 139). If the customer doesn't like the company or the salesperson it might be said out loud or be more indirect (ESC 2015, 22-23).

Time related objections:

- Objections about time are easy to express because the customer gets an excuse or more time to think about the decision. It might be that the customer says he is not able to make the decision right away or needs time for having a second opinion of their side. (Denny 2009, 166-168.)

Price related objections:

- If the value isn't clear for the customer he might complain that the price is too high, the company doesn't have money, their budget is already settled or that the value doesn't exceed the price (Denny 2009, 160, 162.)

Other objections:

- “Too much effort to switch suppliers.”
- “I don’t do business with women.”
- “We are a start up, I don’t think it will work for us because we have a small company.”
- “Do you have the expertise since you are that young?”
- “There is no demand on the market for your product.”
- “We have no room for your line.”
- “I believe that we are able to do business but I need some extra to make it worth my time and trouble.”
- “Do you have any references?”
- “I am not sure it would work in our situation.”
- “I got a better deal from your competitor.”
- “How does your solution differ from the competitor’s?”
- “I don’t know if my manager would agree on the terms.”
- “Do I need a lot of training, investments and time to be able to use it?”
- “Why doesn’t the X part include in the deal, it’s anyway an essential part of the product?”
- “Do you have a guarantee for the product?”

(ESC 2015, 22-23, Sukanen 26.5.2015)

Hunter (2012, 178) advises to be confident and straightforward when it comes to the price negotiation but going into a price negotiation in an early stage of the meeting might ruin the possibilities to end the sale. The customer doesn’t understand yet the benefits he gets by choosing the solution in this stage yet.

When facing an objection the first step is to recognize it and discuss the problem with the customer. Expressing the appreciation to the customer’s thoughts and listening what he’s got to say makes him feel that he’s been heard. When the problems are solved the salesperson can proceed to close the sale. The seller can offer alternatives for the deal and smoothly move towards finalizing the sale. The salesperson should give only few options so that the customer understands that it is a one-time give-and-take process. (Gruenberg 2012, 150.)

The customer wins at the expense of the salesperson if the seller fails to handle the objections properly. (Hunter 2012, 177.) If the customer asks a question which can’t be answered right he should be told that he will get the information later. This shows a professional behaviour even though the salesperson doesn’t know the answer at that moment.

A straightforward attitude is expected and will most probably keep the customer satisfied to the information. (Gruenberg 2012, 152.)

2.1.5 The closing phase

Richard Danny states in his book "Selling to win" (120-121) that people want to buy because they like it. They don't like being sold to but buying is an action they like to do. There are numerous techniques to close a sale and the salesperson helps the customer to buy. It won't be a sale before the interaction is closed and the customer buys.

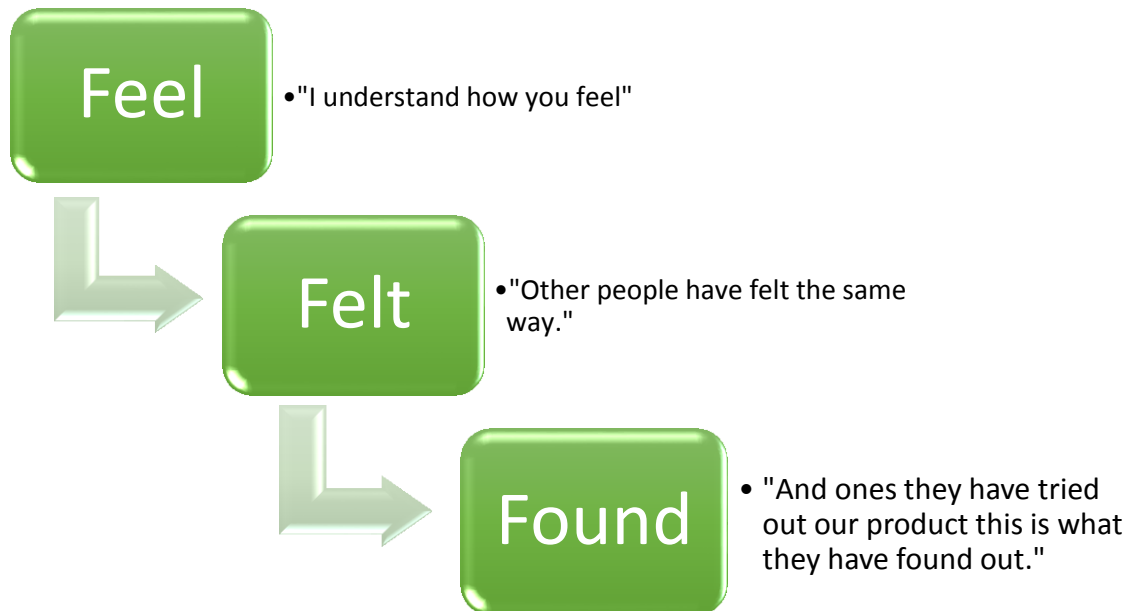
The benefits of the solution should be well explained to the customer before taking initiative to close the sale. The customer will most likely have some objections about the offer which are feedback of the presentation. That is why objections are opportunities instead of rejections because the customer shows his or her interest towards the solution. When the seller feels the situation is right it is time for an active closing. It is up to the sales representative to watch for behavioural signs when the customer is ready to buy. Always the deal is not possible to close in the meeting so the next steps and the commitment should be clarified from the customer. (ESC 42.)

When the salesperson asks a closing question the most important rule is to stay quiet until the customer says something. It might feel like a long time for the seller but not for the customer. And asking questions several times during the meeting will move the customer to buy. It is all the meeting process which leads to sale or loose. This include the communication, the presentation and empathy between the buyer and the salesperson. (Danny 2009, 120, 122.)

The closing should start to feel automatic when few simple rules are followed. And it should also be a natural part of the presentation phase: "Fine, let's do the paperwork!". The closing can also be done by giving few options like "Do you want the premium or gold package?" or "Is 12 or 13 better for you?" (Danny 2009, 123)

Another closing technique is called the "summary of benefits close". After answering all the questions the customer has and done the presentation the salesperson goes back to the needs and reminds about them. The needs should be linked with the benefits the solution will provide so the customer understands the value. After that the seller asks if the customer is willing to buy. (Rangarajan 2012.)

The buyer might answer with a question which refers to objections. The objections can be answered by using a method responding to these doubts. This feel, felt, found –technique aims to give the customer the feeling his not alone in the situation and also others have faced the same situation. By this point is good to bring up references about other clients who have bought the product. Then the customer can be sure that the provided solution is good also for others. (Rangarajan 2012.)



Picture x. Feel, felt, found –method.

If the customer still not want to make the decision right away the salesperson should make sure to decide the next step e.g. propose a next meeting. (Rangarajan 2012.) Some customers might fear the decision making. Firstly the seller has to make sure that the discussion partner is actually the decision maker. There might also be some other persons who are not in the meeting who's got a word in the buying process. Another type of a hesitator is a person who can't make his mind though all the features, values and arguments are gone through. In this situation can be tried to be straight forward and tell the customer that this is the right solution for him and he's got 4 days' time to cancel the bought. (Denny 2009, 124-125.)

2.2 Other aspects in business to business sales

To be successful in sales is not only depending on technique. In today's sales the salesperson has to share information, be collaborative and take his place as a trustworthy advisor. The understanding of the customer's needs comes before the product itself because

without the understanding there's no successful sale. It is not valuable to try exceed short term goals if there's no long time strategy on the background. (Cluytens 2015.)

The buying habits of the customers have changed during the years and an average customer no longer exists. Today the customers are aware of the choice on the market and wants either cheap, convenient business to do with or in depth-help. This means it is not enough to help the customer just briefly because there's more businesses to compete of the customer. The sales must create value by giving advice, customize their solution and by helping them analysing their problems. (Rackham 2012.) The buyers' are present in the social media sharing experiences and information. User experiences and product information is spread real time globally around the world in a continuously faster phase than before. Now it is better called "the world of mouth" than "the word of mouth". (Rowley 2014.) Peer reviews from friends and colleagues via social networking affects the decision making of the customer. Many companies also involve the customer in the product construction, design and production which means that the customer already knows the key points of the product. (McDonnel 2014, 133.)

Nowadays the customers are professional buyers who don't have time to loose and they know more precisely what they are searching for than in the past. They evaluate alternatives, identify opportunities and assess the risks of making a decision which makes them consistent decision makers and fairly predictable. (Eades, 2014.133). Also

The key to success in any business is communication and it becomes even more important when operating internationally. Language barriers can affect misunderstandings which is possible to avoid by knowing the culture and language as well. For instance body language is hard to read if you don't have the knowledge how you should react to it. Different countries have different ways in sharing or conveying a message and that's why the salesperson should know what kind of messages you are sending when interacting with other nationalities. (Passport to trade 2014.) The communication is the base in cross-cultural situations which includes both verbal and non-verbal communication. The analysis of a given message includes various criteria how it's understood. These are speech rate, pronunciation, message content and code-competence. (Suder 2008,134-135.)

The cultural issues impacts selling on a worldwide market place. Culture is the combination of ancient habits, a way of life which includes values, symbols, artifacts, behaviours and other aspects (Baldwin 2013, 5). And when people communicate with each other there's a risk for misunderstandings if the values are not shared between the parties. Un-

Understanding the role of culture is a key to being successful in business internationally. Cultural differences have a direct impact on your profitability, no matter in which sector you are working in. (Passport to trade 2014.)

Depending on the purpose or task the meeting can take many forms. Traditionally business meetings are held face-to-face but corporate meetings are conducted increasingly via video- or teleconference. A meeting is held between two or more people and its goal is to provide context for interaction. (Francis 2012, 34.)

2.2.1 European business etiquette

When talking about cultural differences in business situations there's many aspects to take into consideration. Europe consists of many countries with a wide range of different cultures. Europe can be roughly divided in four areas which have similarities in their cultural behaviour. These areas are the Northern, Southern, Eastern and Western Europe. (Passport to trade 2014.)

In Northern Europe, countries such as Sweden, Finland and Denmark, people have a good skills in English language. Lively gestures, touching and showing emotions in business communications is not usually welcome. Arriving on time is expected because punctuality is regarded as a sign of reliability. Among these countries the adoption of internet technologies and internet penetration is one of the highest in Europe. The communication style in Scandinavia is often open, direct and "to the point". In Ireland and Britain the message and communication is harder to read because they don't like to offend their business partners and a source of disagreement isn't always obvious to detect. (Passport to trade 2014.)

Southern Europe countries, such as Croatia, Italy, Spain and Greece, have a fascinating blend of cultures. The influence how people in the Southern region of Europe do business and communicates is based on the similarities in geography and the climate. The countries have many common aspects when it comes to communication and appropriate business etiquette. Essential ingredients to successful business lies on developing personal relationship with business counterparts, maintaining strong bonds with business partners and contacting the right people within the company. Therefore, being respectful, trustworthy and loyal will facilitate business operations with these cultures. Generally people are open to dealing with foreign people in business and friendly by their behaviour. (Passport to trade 2014.)

An important aspect of business meetings is punctuality, but not every country has the same time perception. In Croatia, Malta and Slovenia people value punctuality and expect business partners to do the same, whilst in Italy, Spain and Greece being late is not considered impolite. Using expressive gestures is common in these countries but some are considered as rude to offensive and insulting depending on the country. For instance, avoid pointing someone with your finger or making the "OK" sign in Cyprus, Turkey and Greece. (Passport to trade 2014.)

In Western European countries like France, Germany, Austria and Netherlands, people favour formal arrangements in business. Formalities and documentation is preferred over personal relationships when doing business. In these countries punctuality tends to be valued but other business behaviours are different in these countries, even though they are geographically located close to each other. For example, in Netherlands and Belgium it is not needed to use the complete title of a person together with his last name to address her or him. The title is not that necessary, only the name. However, in France, Austria, Germany and Luxemburg this is not the case – rather, be extremely formal and show politeness by speaking with the title and last name. Most people speaks English as well as German as their business language. In France however, it is appreciated to speak in French since it is a major part of their national culture. (Passport to trade 2014.)

People across the Eastern European region have compatible cultural norms such as giving gifts, greeting a business partner or scheduling a meeting when conducting business. For instance Latvia, Poland, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Romania and Estonia are located in the Eastern Europe and there's many similarities likewise in business etiquette regarding time keeping, dress code, taboos, corruption and bribery. In all of these countries it is preferred to address formally using the office or educational titles and communicating face-to-face. Attitude and how to set up a meeting and greeting people are similar as well and punctuality is a sign of reliability. (Passport to trade 2014.)

Eastern European nations can be divided in the Baltic, Central and Balkan countries. Geographically the region covers the area from North to South and the size of population varies among these countries significantly. Because of the wide geographical spread there are some notable differences in behaviour and communication. For instance Slovaks and Polish are more outspoken and straight forward with their opinion while Czechs are generally non-confrontational. Even though the sales meeting structure is similar, the hierarchical system is strictly observed but negotiation styles vary in these countries. Slovaks and Czechs prefer a longer negotiation process and a good presentation while Estonians and Poles are more formal and written-detail oriented. Understanding and knowing the

business etiquette in different cultures is of paramount importance in helping to develop personal and professional relationships in Europe. (Passport to trade 2014.)

Depending on the situation different kind of action and communication is needed. By being aware of these different types of intelligence, it allows us to understand and act better in an appropriate way according to the situation. Intelligence can be measured in multiple ways but the traditionally only cognitive intelligence, IQ, is the valid way to acknowledge intelligence. However, contemporary research identifies several types of intelligence. These are general mental ability, Cultural Intelligence and Emotional Intelligence. Cultural Intelligence includes understanding your own cultural intelligence as well as others. Research demonstrates that by improving your CQ there's more productivity in decision making and adaptation in cross-cultural situations. CQ improves effectiveness, creativity, innovation and reduces attrition in culturally diverse situations. (The Cultural Intelligence Center 2015.)

People with high CQ are more likely to read situations and make effective decisions in cultural contexts. That means you improve your negotiation skills whether it is a day-to-day or a formal negotiation of a contract and reaching an agreement is more likely in intercultural encounters. Trust is built on understanding the behaviors and values of the other person which makes the cultural understanding essential also in business. CQ predicts your effectiveness and ability to drive growth and to provide what the customer needs in a global environment. (The Cultural Intelligence Center 2015.)

2.2.2 Skills of a salesperson

Speak, act, look and think like a professional salesperson and you become one. This is the advice Richard Denny gives in his book "Selling to win" (14-15.). Salespersons job is to make the decision making easy for the customer and keeping the process simple.

"Sales is not work, it is a way of living. Attitude counts." – Pekka Juhola (Helsingin Sanomat 2015.)

Business doesn't happen between companies, it is always a people-to-people situation. Since it takes people to make a deal, negotiate and conclude the deal, the base is the strength of the business relationship. A salesperson should know his customer and earn the trust of his client in order to be successful whether it is any field of activity. Developing a solid relationship between the potential customer and the salesperson takes often more than one meeting. It takes time for both parties to get to know each other and before the

trust is built. (Gruenberg 2014, 4.) All kind of personalities are needed in sales and the salesperson has to be proud of his work and value sales as a profession. Often the greatest barrier of the sales is the salesperson himself. The salesperson has to do the buying easy and make the customer comfortable in the buying situation. A customer who gets good service is more likely willing to return and buy again. (Helsingin Sanomat 2015.)

The person who knows the most of the product might not be the best seller. Product knowledge is primarily not meant for the customer but for the seller to better understand the key points. Technical details are good to know but people do not buy products; instead they want results. (Denny 2009, 98.) All interaction with people is formed by communication. It includes both verbal and non-verbal communication which is influenced by culture and personal habits. The seller has to understand his own communication style to be able to discuss and negotiate with others. It affects how well the message is understood by the receiving party and how easily people trust the salesperson. Whether it is motivating, coaching, interviewing, counselling or managing a team interpersonal skills are needed. By taking different communication styles into account when dealing with people it is more likely to succeed in giving the right message to your audience. (Schwartch, 2006. 20.)

When developing personal skills in communication often the art of listening is neglected. A dialogue is not two monologues talking past each other, it is responding to what you hear by active listening, not what you want to hear (McDonnel 2014, 136).

3 Empirical part

The methodology of this thesis is accomplished as a narrative and the qualitative research supports the study outcome. The people interviewed are two competitors from year 2014 and 2015 and one judge from Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences. The product of the research is a manual to the Best practices in the European Sales Competition. The study is made as a narrative which will give first-hand information about the competition what the coaches of the competitors' can't give. The narrative is an introduction to the competition which the discussion will complement in a practical way. The aim is that it can be used in the future European Sales Competition trainings to help the competitors to make the best of the big day.

3.1 Product and study material

The European Sales Competition provided a lot of material and sources to study the research question. The writers own personal experience and notes from the competition are complemented with the interviews of a judge and two participants in the European Sales Competition.

The theoretical part is based on academic online and video material as well as other relevant literature and articles. The data was collected to answer the research question and support the investigation subject of the thesis.

3.2 Time frame

The thesis research started with collecting sources already in May and the writing process two weeks after the competition in June 2015. Due to the original plan the thesis was supposed to be ready already by the end of July but finally the process lasted until November.

Due to my graduation date in December and last internship waiting in fall, I decided to write my thesis during the summer. I spent June and July abroad in Italy and France combining traveling, writing the thesis and working on my own company at distance. The five week writing schedule wasn't too optimistic but it is better to concentrate just on one project at a time. Also the circumstances abroad are not the best when you want to work mobile and you need internet. Moving from a place to another requires you always some time to settle down and find the rhythm to work.

Since I left abroad to write my thesis I had to collect all the sources before departure. I used mostly academic sources online but later in fall I completed the theory with other material such as books and articles.

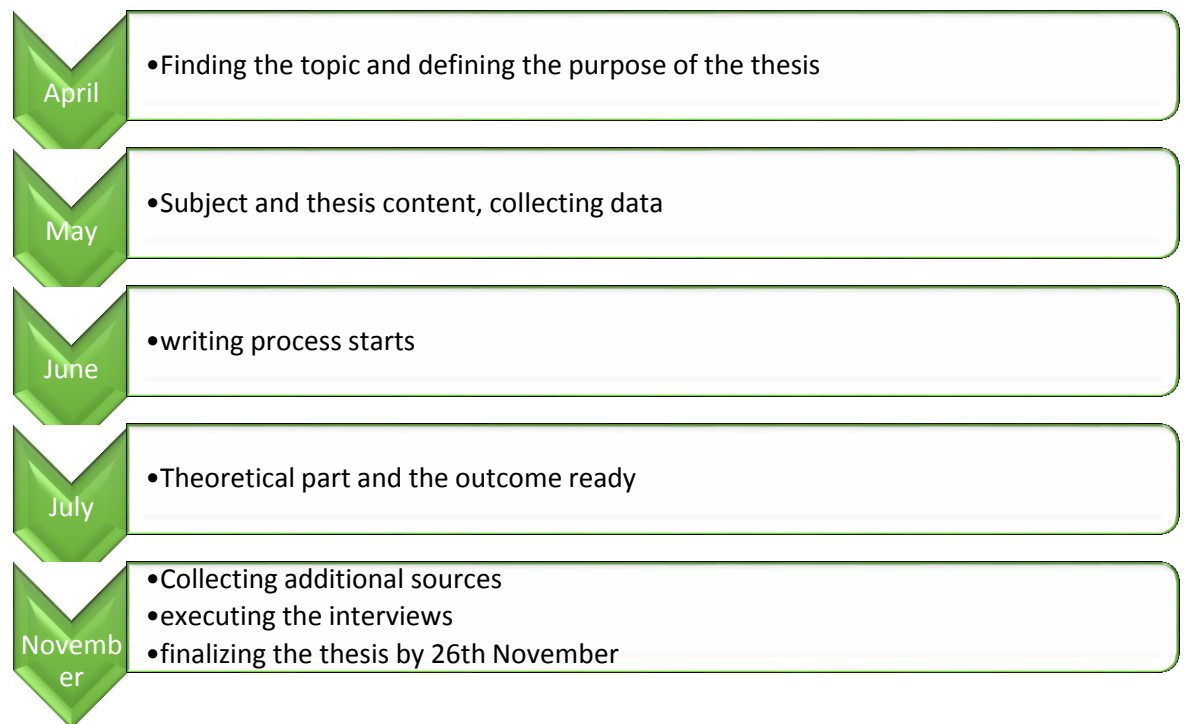


Image 1. Thesis time frame and schedule.

The interviews were executed in November since at the time I returned to work in August I was overwhelmed with work in my new position as the CEO of PuskaPromotion. I completed the theory by new source material and decided to do the thesis assignment as a product. There were a gap before the thesis was completed in May 2016 due to work.

3.3 The European Sales Competition

I was on my third and last year of university at the time I started the training to the competition. I was studying BBA as a major in sales which was of course an advantage in preparing to the competition. I participated in the national Best Seller Competition earlier that spring in Turku which gave me the courage to attend also the competition on a European level. Besides school I was working in my own company PuskaPromotion so I had few years' business to business sales experience from before.

The training started straight after the Best Seller Competition in Finland and the schedule was quite tight. There was only 5-6 coaching sessions planned which meant that the training was going to be very intensive. The training included mainly self-studying because there was no time to study the product during the coaching sessions.

The training and time in for the competition was limited the plan had to be clear. During studying and preparing you need to understand which information is relevant due to the limited preparation time. A lot of information was provided by Oracle and besides that we had a Student Field book consisting of sales theory and cultural aspects. In the ESC you both need to handle the timing as well as your performance.

The coaching started only three weeks before the competition and during that time there were only four coaching sessions together with the teacher. It was strange and in a way pity that only four students participated in the coaching and didn't take the chance to take part in the competition. ESC is a once in a lifetime opportunity to show your skills to an audience consisting of big, globally working companies. Only taking part as a competitor will push your CV and give you the possibility to network with professionals working round the globe.

The coaching was quite different from the training in Best Seller Competition because of the educational style of the teacher. In the national competition the course lasted for few months and it was more about discussing and studying together. Also the teaching was more based on a pre-planned learning schedule compared to the European Competition training where the students were always asked what's their goal for the coaching session. Best Seller Competition was a good base for the ESC challenge which was on the next level in difficulty.

As in any competition the technique and preparedness matters. Thomas Kurz (10 December 2012) writes in his blog about mental training in sports. He represents that the control of mind affects the ability to step out from the so called "emotional comfort zone". In other words it means that managing your emotions, concentration and stress will help to improve the performance. As well as in sports, also in business the technique needs to be perfect but the mind even stronger. Sales as a profession is mentally demanding because of strong result expectations and that's why tolerance towards stress needs to be high.

3.3.1 The big day

The competition lasted for one whole day and started in the morning with registration by the competitors. We were two participants from Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences; me and Karla Vallila who came 2nd in the Best Seller Competition a month before. Karla was actually a bit hesitant to participate in the European Sales competition but I'm glad she chose to try it out. If it's nerve breaking to compete in the national competition it is definitely ten times more stressful to hit the stage on a European level.

We shared a room and had worked late to finish our scripts until midnight. We were warned not to over-train ourselves the day before just to keep the good spirit. I had prepared my script and other material late in the night but I felt confident with the overall preparation. I finished my script and printed it in the hotel's reception before going to bed. I visualized my performance few times before falling to sleep. I think neither me nor Karla enjoyed too much the stress taking over. Breakfast was hard to eat in the morning and our coach Piia Hautamäki saw that we were freaking out. Luckily we had a hotel quite close to the Vlerick Business School where the competition was held so we didn't need to leave too early.

This year there were 27 competitors from 14 different Business Schools participating in the semi-finals. The competitors were divided in sections and one of each section made it to the final round. The evaluation was based on the evaluation form in the European Sales Competition hand book. The evaluation sheet for the finals was a bit different from the semi-final one because the rounds had different goals. In the semi-final it was more about the needs identification and getting the agreement on proceeding and in the finals the competitors had to actually close the deal. The values and emphasis on the evaluation might anyway differ between the persons in the jury due to their different backgrounds in business.

3.3.2 1st round – the semi-final

The competition started with semi-final rounds before noon and the afternoon was reserved for the final round. The competitors were taken to the green rooms to prepare themselves where it was easier to concentrate. Soft drinks and snacks were provided in the cafeteria during the preparation for the rounds. We were led to separate rooms depending on the University and even the coaches were accepted to join us. That was strange because the teachers could have given some information concerning the semi-finals. Compared to the national competition Best Seller, the event was much more unorganized in total. A shared opening would have also been useful since now we just went

with the information we had. It made us just more nervous because we had to make sure all the time we were in right place the right time.

The competitors were divided in groups with the same amount of participants. These groups were set for the semi-final rounds and each section had its jury of 4-5 professionals. The jury consisted of a mix of different company delegates and University teachers. The first qualifying round is where the competitor meets the customer for the first time. The goal of the first round is to get the next meeting and have a commitment of proceeding in the process. The customers have got a confidential profile description before the competition in order to make the meeting situation as real as possible and equal for each participant. The confidential profile describes the role and mood of the buyer which he needs to adapt to.



Pic 2. Competition material.

I was taken from the green room and left in front of the meeting room. A guide will lead the participant to the right room according to the schedule given to the competitors. The guy wished me good luck and went. For some reason it was not the right meeting room and I had to go and ask for somebody to help. I walked few times around the hall and found the right place with some other guide. The time starts when the competitor stands behind the meeting room's door and knocks on the door. After that the show was in my own hands

for the next 20 minutes. I saw straight the meeting table and the customer sitting backwards to me. I went to shake hands with him and forgot in the rush to close the door. The customer went and closed the door while I was organizing my papers nervously.

He sat down and we started with a little small talk and I handed him a small present from Finland. The last years' finalist Doris Tuohimaa had also used this same trick in order to give a nice impression. The customer thanked for the gift but wasn't as excited about it as Doris client the past year (anyway it was a Fazer's chocolate bar!). I remembered to ask all relevant things in the beginning; how much time we had, a short introduction of Oracle which I presented and me and my professional title. I borrowed a business card to hand over as mine. This was quite automated and I continued to present the agenda and asked if he had something to add. Since we agreed on the time and subjects to go through I proceed to the needs identification part and questions about the client's current situation. We discussed about their goals for the future, how many employees they had and what they were looking for in a service provider like ours. You should spend the most time in this part but I was too nervous and continued too quickly to other things. I'm familiar with English but when there's a nearly native speaker and you need to take care both of the overall discussion and the timing it makes you speed up with the doing.

After I got all information I needed I made a quick summary and asked "permission" to proceed to the product presentation. I tried to collect just the most relative material including few Power Point pages with graphics, my notebook, a pen, my telephone and my business card. I would haven't felt comfortable with an iPad and on the papers you can always write if needed. The client sat quite far away in the end of the table so I had to really lean front and get his eye contact in order to get him involved in the presentation. He hadn't that many objections and I had still three minutes to go. Basically he was worried about the suitability to his company and was it easy to take in use. I had my phone on the table to count the time and I had already got a "yes" but I had to propose for a precise time and place. That's when the knock came and the timekeeper shout at the door: "Times out!" I reacted just saying: "Shit!" and covered my mouth when I realised I actually said that out loud. The jury gave a laugh and thanked me for my performance. I walked out nearly shocked because I had had an eye on the time and I surely still had few minutes. When I entered the room I remembered to check my watch which I hadn't stopped yet. There was still some time left and I searched right away the organizer to check it up. He talked with the guy at the door and came to me being sorry for the mistake.

The jury stays in the meeting room filling out the evaluation. The mistake with the time was taken into count in the evaluation which I was really happy about. Finally all went well despite there's was these incidences. I felt I got the next meeting quite easy but I really didn't have an idea if it went good or not. 20 minutes had flown away and I didn't remember what I had spoken in the room. Now I could sit down and breathe in the lobby.

3.3.3 2nd round – finals

After the semi-final rounds there's a break during the jury is working on the evaluation. The number of finalists depends on how many qualification rounds there are in the first round. The best of each group will proceed to the finals. The scores and evaluation of the qualifying round does not affect the points in the final round which means that the finalist starts from the same line in the finals.

Later we were asked to gather in the lobby followed by a nervous, waiting atmosphere. The announcement was quite simple and not festive at all. The organizer just told the results out. Me and Karla didn't know what to expect and we joked half serious that we wouldn't make it to the finals just to quit the stress. But we were astonished to hear that two competitors were going to the finals! We looked at each other and said: "it's just two of us!". I tried to gather myself again to one piece and take the fact that the next set was coming. The finalists were announced just before the preparation time of the finals so we were taken to the green room, this time all five competitors in the same one.

The final rounds' goal is to close the deal and have a price negotiation. One hour before the meeting the finalist receives a new customer profile. The negotiation details in the semi-finals couldn't be used in the final round so the discussion starts from an empty table.

The finalists were supposed to choose a opponent partner for the preparation of the final competition. A real-time streaming is provided of the final rounds what the other participants can follow in the auditorium. (ESC 2015c, 7.) The evaluation in the semi-final round is different from the final round due to the goals. Comp also from diff schools.

3.3.4 Thoughts and feelings after the competition

Of course we were released and happy about our situation – Karla had taken the shared first place and I the 4th place in the finals. After all this stress, work and preparation it felt good to finally take a breath. And it was definitely worth trying! And not at least I'm proud of the Finnish representation in the finals: among five finalists four of them were women

and three of them Finns. Not that bad for a country which is more known for its technology knowledge and not for sales skills. This should absolutely be improved in the future.

After the finals a walk-in dinner is served and the winners will be announced before eating. The dinner is quite informal and planned so there's time and space for mingling and networking with all the participants of the competition. This is the best time to speak with the company delegates and introduce your interest in future opportunities in these companies. It is best to be forward and take the chance to approach all stakeholders of the event. The companies are participate and sponsor the competition so they could find future talent to hire. I talked also with my "customer" from the semi-final round. I was very happy to receive feedback from him which is relieving and gives some ideas what to improve in the future. He told me e.g. that I should have dig more of the information because I scratched only the façade. He also noted that it is maybe not a good idea to give gifts, even a five euro one, because some companies have strict policies in receiving any kind of presents. This is to prevent corruption and to act transparently. In opposite he told me that we had the connection in the meeting what he didn't have with the other competitors. To develop a good business relationship it requires open communication and trust.

It was interesting (and horrible) to see our performances later on a video. I don't care about the filming in the situation because I don't even realize it but afterwards it feels intimidating. I have felt same whether it was a dance competition or the European Sales one. You don't kind of want to see your mistakes again, though the mistakes are what you should watch in order to improve your skills! It was also interesting to see that all of the five finalists were quite different in their style. E.g. the negotiation style and the skills in negotiation varied a lot including myself. And I know that the first round was much better than the second one but I'm glad of my fourth place anyway. Probably the styles were based on the schools the participants were presenting but also their personalities. One was very diplomatic, the other arrogant and even aggressive and some gave too much space to the customer. Also the unnerving competition situation where your skills are evaluated didn't help for sure in trying to be focused.



Pic. 3. Enjoying Brussels after the competition.

We had few days to spend in Brussels on our own and it was in a way a present trip for our achievements (pic x.). At the same time we were thrilled about the outcome of the competition and wondered what this might lead to. Karla had already some plans for her next employer and me, I knew that the competition experience could be useful for future career plans. Next year I was anyway going to manage my own company which I felt important for developing my professional skills. All these tasks in a start-up are not available in a structured big company so I find it valuable to learn these things first. An international career is what I'm striving for but the time will come a bit later.

3.3.5 Interviews

In this chapter is introduced two competitors from the European Sales Competition and one of the judges. One of the competitors was Karla Vallila who came on a shared 1st place in the competition year 2015. Doris Tuohimaa presents the European Sales Competition in 2014 when the competition was held the first time. She came that year 2nd and both of the participants had a background in Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences with a major in B2B Sales. They participated also successfully in the national Best Seller Competition and gained experience from the preparation. (Tuohimaa 16.11.2015)

The other party of the competition is the jury and the business delegates who judge the performances in the competition. One of the judges in Brussels year 2015 was Piia Hautamäki. She is a sales teacher in Haaga-Helia University and is working on her doctoral

thesis. The best candidates from the national competitions are usually chosen to the European Sales Competition. The judges of the competition evaluate the candidates due to the rules in European Sales Competition. For both rounds there's an evaluating form which guidelines the judgement criteria. (Hautamäki 16.11.2015)

The competitors	
<p>In 2014 Doris Tuohimaa was managing her own company PuskaPromotion and eager to challenge herself businesswise. She found the European Sales Competition as a great opportunity to get experience how to do business internationally and travel abroad.</p> <p>Her background is in customer service and she's maintained experiences in business to business selling in her own company. She's been the head of the board and later on also the CEO and responsible of all the sales the tow first years.</p> <p>Theoretical knowledge about business to business she's obtained in Haaga-Helia University and the coaching period before the competition.</p> <p>She won the second place in 2014.</p>	<p>Karla Vallila who won the shared first place in 2015 participated in the competition because she wanted to improve her negotiation skills and challenge herself. She had already succeeded in the Best Seller Competition a month before where she took the second place.</p> <p>Her background is in consumer business and about business to business sales she's been learning in university and these competitions.</p> <p>She came on a shared first place in 2015.</p>

Table 1. The competitors

Hautamäki sees a lot of advantages by participating in the competition both for the students and companies. It is important to improve the prestige of the profession of sales and to give opportunities to the students to show their skills. For the companies it is a recruiting possibility to scout new talents.

In year 2014 there was eight competitors and few big sponsors such as Oracle, Salesforce and Gartner. The competition was meant to be held in Poland but they were

disqualified due to their deceit. They released the secret documents about the competition and product information to the students and got caught. With a tight schedule the competition was moved to Belgium instead. In year 2015 the competition was held in Vlerick Business School with a grown group of competitors from 14 different business schools in Europe.

The preparation to the competition	
Doris found the preparation to the competition mentally stressful since she had to work on her own company and focus on the training at the same time.	The training period was challenging for Karla. She had been sick for a while and had to skip few of the coaching sessions. That meant a <i>lot of preparation by herself</i> by studying the competition manual and product information.
Having a lot of responsibility as the salesperson in PuskaPromotion didn't help her situation. She hadn't really no spare time and felt unprepared when traveling to Belgium.	She prepared herself by first studying the product and the company she was meant to represent in the competition.
It was just one day before the competition she felt that she was ready for the contest. She prepared her script until late in the morning and then she felt ready to face the judges.	She had few successful meetings with her competition partner and the coach Marika Alhonen who's a learning coach in Haaga-Helia University Porvoo campus.
Though it was challenging she says that working under stress suits her and even enjoyable.	<p>The material included searching information on</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • internet pages • company videos and • other related sources. <p>She states that the experience from the Best Seller Competition helped her in preparing to this competition.</p>

Table 2. The preparation of the competition.

The main sponsor for the competition has been Oracle for the past two competitions. According to Hautamäki the product or solution could have been a bit simpler what it have

been the previous times. Compared to the Finnish national Best Seller Competition the product was a way more complex in the European Sales Competition. Selling intangible solutions affects extra work to the salesperson to explain the values in a way the customer understands it. (Hautamäki 16.11.2015)

The product to be sold	
<p>The product was Oracles Eloqua marketing automation system. It is a software and a marketing tool which helps companies due to the automation.</p>	<p>Year 2015 the competition product was the Social Sourcing Tool from Oracle. She felt it challenging to start selling a cloud based service which wasn't familiar to her.</p>
<p>In Doris opinion it was very hard to even understand the function of the tool and why the customer would need it. As well the differentiation from other marketing software providers was hard to point out.</p>	<p>That might have been anyway her key to success since she had to understand and explain the solution in a very short time.</p>

Table 3. The product to be sold.

The preparation material consisted on information on Oracles web pages, videos and other available material online. They were also provided a Sales manual about international differences, the SPIN –selling technique, cross cultural communication and details of the evaluation criteria's. She studied also the customer experiences using that product since the company didn't provide a lot of in-house material. Doris tells that they had to find the relevant information themselves and use the material which is provided for the customers, not Oracles salespeople.

Training
<p>The competitors were provided a coach from Haaga-Helia StartUp School who trained the participants to face the competition day. Marika Alhonen give coaching sessions both for the group of participants as well as privet ones.</p>
<p>The coaching lasted just for a short time period and under 20 hours in total. That meant</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a lot of preparation on own hand.

Doris states that the biggest challenge during the training was

- the lack of time

She states that it is crucial to be able to be extremely self-acting in order to get the best overlook on the subject.

Table 4. Training.

Piia Hautamäki states that a thorough needs identification and a well justified proposition to the customer to his need is the key to success in the European Sales competition. The European Sales competition is neither a language competition where the participant have to speak bilingually English. The non-native speakers have succeeded in the competition which proves that a high level in verbal language skills is not required. (Hautamäki 18.11.2015)

Core sales skills	
<p>In Doris Tuohimaas opinion the competitor has to be sure about her or himself. Trust in own skills is one of the keys so it's going to work.</p> <p>Most importantly, listening what the customer has to say and a sincere will to understand the client are a necessity to success in the meeting. Putting yourself in the position of the customer will help the salesperson to find the reasons why the customer would be willing to buy.</p> <p>The seller has to know</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the product • the emphasis is on the social interaction <p>Asking enough questions and not pushing own ideas helps to find the customers problems. By a careful needs identification it's made sure that the customer understands the big picture about the solution.</p>	<p>Karlas' advices in succeeding in the competition are that the competitor has to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • manage the timing and • know the product <p>Since the timing is limited it is not possible to go into detail or you will lose the grip of the conversation. In the competition it is important to understand cultural aspects and manners but behave yourself as you normally are.</p> <p>Karla for instance gets frequently feedback that she doesn't smile enough. She says that if she tried to smile more or act in a way she's not she would feel ridiculous and couldn't focus properly on her performance. Better to be true to yourself and keeping it simple.</p>

Table 5. Core sales skills.

The evaluation criteria varies a bit in the semi-finals and the final round. The goal of the semi-final is to get the next meeting and in the final the competitor has to actually close the sale. All of the phases in the meeting is graded from 1-5 including the opening, the interaction between the customer and the salesperson, proposed solution and how the seller closed the sale. Even the person acting the customer is asked for his opinion about the meeting in total.

The competition performances are filmed and the final round can be streamed online or from the auditorium. This didn't worry Doris Tuohimaa or Karla Vallila too much since they couldn't concentrate on anything else than their own script and the customer. Doris states that however some people can feel it uncomfortable to be filmed and stay in front of a jury.

The script and meeting process	
<p>She split her script in parts and concentrated on the time. 1-2 minutes is enough for small talk in the beginning to be followed by telling the agenda and introducing yourself.</p> <p>Most time should be spent in asking questions and she left 5 minutes for closing the deal. Doris was efficient with the time 18,5 minutes when the meeting was over.</p>	<p>Karla Vallilas' script was as follows</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • few minutes of introduction and • proceeding to the needs and questioning for about five minutes • A brief summary of the questions just to remind the key points • then moving to the presentation • closing the deal <p>After ten minutes of the conversation she was already heading for the closing which should start latest at 12 minutes.</p> <p>When 18 minutes has passed should the seller already tell the customer that we are running out of time and the decision should be made. Karla's advice is to keep calm in the beginning and taking the time to ask proper questions.</p>

Table 6. The script and the meeting process.

Compared to real life business meetings 20 minutes is a short time and that's why Hautamäki advises to focus on the closing. Since it is a competition and the performance is evaluated there might be a situation where the closing seems a bit pushy and the competitor doesn't have a natural way of ending the conversation. (Hautamäki 16.11.2015)

Best practices in the competition	
<p>Doris Tuohimaas' best advices are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • stay present and learn how to focus • do really care for the customer 100 percent and do not try to sell everything to the customer • know the keypoints because there's no time to go into in-depth detail with the technical issues. 	<p>Karla Vallilas advices:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • get experience of selling • be true to yourself and act as you normally do • manage the timing, there's no time for in depth technical conversation • know your product

Table 7. The best practices in the competition.

After the competition she's got several job proposals from big, international companies such as Gartner and Salesforce. The best experience in Doris Tuohimaas opinion was the interview in London invited by Gartner. She got the flight tickets paid and Gartner had organized a personal interviewing day for her where she had to fulfill several assignments. She was left waiting for nearly 2 hours when they took her to a second round. Unfortunately she couldn't make it to the next round but she was happy about the opportunity to show her skills. Also Karla Vallila has found several job opportunities. After the sales competitions she's got job proposals from different companies. Now she's doing her thesis to one of the sponsoring companies in the Best Seller Competition and she will start working there in January 2016 after her graduation.

Doris Tuohimaa is now a mother of a 2 month old baby and plans to concentrate on the family life at the moment. In the future she sees herself back to business and giving mentoring help to others. Every experience matters and she's eager to share them with others. Karla Vallila is starting in a new company after her graduation in 2015.

4 The manual to best practises in the ESC

The “Best practises in the European Sales Competition” is implemented as a guide in this chapter. The guide is written based on the writers own experience and the narrative, complemented with coach and competitor interviews. The competition is an exciting opportunity to develop relevant business skills in a sales meeting simulation which each person experience differently. That is why the author has interviewed several competitors from the first and second held competitions. The coaches and competition managers give then an overlook on the big picture. In order to be successful in the competition the competitor has to take many details in consideration.

This guide provides a comprehensive study on all the shareholders opinions on the competition experience. Also for a further research it is useful to collect information from as many sources as possible. The competitor’s point of view is also a bit different to the jury since they are having different roles. The jury member judges according to the evaluation form as well as he reflects the participants’ performance to his own experience. The competitor again has to both keep in mind the evaluation criteria as well as manage his or her behaviour and feelings during the competition. The coaches again has the most time to influence the competitor’s skills and lead him or her to the right direction.

The competition process can be divided in three steps: the preparation, the actual competition and the time after the competition day. The European Sales Competition is not just a one day exam on how to do sales but a great possibility to open new carrier paths in the future. For the competitor it is a learning journey where huge improvements can happen in a short time. The preparation will take a lot of effort and energy so that’s probably the most time consuming.

There’s a lot on information available for those who are interested in training business negotiation skills. Sometimes it is hard to choose and understand which material is relevant or in any way necessary for the task. The European Sales Competition doesn’t just test the participants’ sales meeting skills but also how well the students are able to understand wide and complex subjects. Both the sponsor and the internet provides information which are not useful or goes into detail so the competitor got to be critical in finding sources. By understanding the preparation steps to the competition and how to deal with overwhelming information the participant can reduce the stress and focus on the key competences.

Above that the limited time puts pressure in managing the preparation process before the competition day. The competitor has to understand complex subjects in a very short time which can be demanding during the spring exam period. The world is continuously speeding up the pace in business as well as in individuals' life which means completing tasks in a shorter period of time. In this sense the competition is a versatile task to test the competitor's competences. They got to manage themselves, their own learning, the time they've got in use, train their interpersonal skills and master the sales meeting process. All these skills are valuable in the future work life as well as in life in general.

As in sports also in business the amount of practise is in line with the success. The coaching period is actually the time when the most job is done. In the competition sales meeting simulation of 20 minutes the competitor shows his or her skills only once or twice. That means that the sales meeting management and the answers have to come from the neck bone. The only person the competitor can impact is himself which means he has to put all focus on his own performance. This is achieved with a well prepared materials to the meeting, mental training and by the support of coaches and other social support.

By knowing the product, managing own performance and understanding cultural behaviour the competitor is able to succeed in the sales meeting situation. Sales requires skills in listening to others and answering in the best suitable way. This means that the competitor has to understand firstly personality types in general as well as the cultural differences in business. And in order to reach this goal the competitor has to understand his or her own personality so that he or she is able to react in a suitable way towards the customer. Sometimes it requires slowing down on the speaking pace or just taking more physical contact and focus on the introduction. When the competitor is aware of himself he's also more probably able to keep the lead of the discussion in the sales meeting.

The competition day lasts from early morning to the evening and will be quite stressing. Most of the participants travel to the destination and stays just for the night so all of the material must be to hand and printed before the trip. Each meeting will be recorded and available for the competitors afterwards. Once the finalists are announced most of the competitors can relax. The challenge is there to come to those who made it to the top four. There will be a break before the dinner and the pricing is held in the beginning of the dinner. The dinner is a perfect time to take all of the networking with the sponsors and other shareholders. The companies are there to recruit and they search for the next talents to have in their company. Many of the previous competitors have got job offers and even been hired after the competition. This is why it's important to be prepared to socialise as much as possible during the free-time.

Most of the competitors might be in the end of their studies but not yet graduated. That's why it is necessary to stay in touch with the company delegates. Keeping them informed of your situation will increase your possibilities to stay on their follow-on list. Above that it is important to keep your online Curriculum Vitae updated on all times. Especially after the competition whether you won or not it is a valuable asset to mention about your competition experience. And finally when you graduate you have the contact information to reach the right people in the companies you are interested in.

Here's listed the best practices in order to succeed in the competition.

The best practices in the European Sales Competition

1. Decide your goal – take the risk

You have to make a decision whether you participate in the competition or not. There will be a million of arguments why not to participate; you lack of time, it is too scary, you don't feel ready to face the challenge, everybody else have superior skills to me and so on.

Take the risk and apply for the competition. It is a once in a life time opportunity to show your business skills in front of a (recruiting) business jury. When in life are you going to have this possibility again?

2. Prepare

You might have one month, few weeks or only few hours actual preparation time before the competition. Collect information and try to get an overlook on the subject. What are the questions you don't understand? What information is actually relevant for you in order to succeed?

What kind of equipment do you need? Do you want to use an Ipad in the sales meeting or do you feel more for drawing? You probably want to have all the necessary preparation material and information printed though you would only use online material. That will help you to scan the information and focus on reading in a different way.

3. Train

Plan your time. How much time do you got in use for studying the subject? Prioritize and focus on the main points.

When training the sales pitch in real life do it over and over again. Preferably train with different people, both with those who know the subject and with others who don't. Then you will get the best feedback on issues you wouldn't otherwise think about. If you can convince a person who's not familiar with the subject then you can sell to anyone. That means also that you are able to present a solution in a nut scale in a simple way.

Timing is also crucial so be careful in spending not too much time on less important parts in the meeting. Focus on the needs identification and answer in the need. When you can answer all the customers' questions then you can close the deal.

4. Do your best, trust in yourself

If you are given a certain amount of time and some information then you are going to face the challenge with that knowledge. Just do the best you can according to the circumstances. There's no need to compare yourself to the other competitors because that's what you can't control. The only thing you can control is yourself and be as prepared as you can.

5. Keep the charge in the meeting

In the sales meeting simulation you can't know in advance how the customer is going to behave. Since you are the Sales Representative you are supposed to take the lead of the discussion in a friendly but determined way. Don't let the customer lead you to side tracks or talk too long about irrelevant subjects. You have a limited period of time to use which means you need to follow that schedule in order to close the deal.

6. Ask right questions

Let the customer talk and explain his or her situation. Your job is to listen and dig further to get the information you need. That makes also the customer feel that

he's been listened to and probably he understands that he's got a problem. Ask open questions and even repeat the answer if you want to know more.

7. Answer to the need

Now when the customer has realized he's got an urgent problem to solve it is your turn to answer the need. Don't talk about details the customer is not interested in neither about option A, B and C if he's interested in option D. Provide only solutions what the customer "want to hear". Knowing well the product will help you in providing relevant information.

8. Close the deal

When you feel you have answered all questions the customer might have had it is time to start closing. There's several ways to close the meeting and it might require few times before the customer says yes. Asking a clear closing question will make the customer feel that the deal is clear and taken to an end.

9. Network/keep in touch

Take all advantage of the possibility to network with the competition shareholders. Stay in touch online, by phone and discuss with as many company delegates as possible during the competition day.

Update all your online profiles which are relevant for recruiters. Also your competitor network might provide opportunities in some companies that you haven't thought about.

Table 8. The best practices in the European Sales Competition.

With these steps the participants can prepare their selves to the competition challenge and be aware of the key issues. Winning has to first be a decision and without a determined mind there is less possibility to succeed. Many people neglect this fact and miss a lot of opportunities they could have get only by deciding yes. Already that is a proof of talent when the competitor have made the decision to participate. It is better to trust in own skills and jump into the water than stay on the ground and speculate if you could have learned to swim. The competition takes time, nerves and skills in order to succeed but will for sure be a remarkable experience for the student to show his skills in business negotiation. Participating in the European Sales Competition opens doors to work life as well as trains the competitors' professional business skills to the next level.

5 Discussion

The discussion offers conclusions on the basis of the results and presents suggestions and development ideas for further research. The product of this thesis research is a manual to the best practises in the European Sales Competition to be used in the training for the future competitors.

5.1 Reliability and validity

This research is made as a narrative based on the experiences on the writer which gives a real view on the competition process. These findings are supported with academic sources and interviews as a qualitative research method from both a judges and competitors point of view. The literate material is collected from academic sales classics supplemented with today's up to date information on sales techniques.

The outcome is valuable especially for the future European Sales Competition competitors who can study the key points from an easy to read Power Point manual. The "Best practices in the European Sales Competition" –manual can be part of the coaching course and give some firsthand information on the competition experience. The manual might also give an inspiration for those who are thinking about participating in the competition. The coach can support and guide the participants in the technical sales skills and a previous competitor experience can prepare the competitor in issues what the coach can't.

5.2 Development and follow-on research suggestions

The best practices in the European Sales Competition –manual can be continued with additional research or guide information. The competition has been held only few years which means that the competition concept will be develop year after year.

An interesting follow-on research could be how to make the sales meeting simulation to correspond even more a real life situation. The twenty minute competition session is compact but doesn't state the real business to business meeting time. In comparison a longer sales meeting simulation would be quite tough for both the participants and the audience. One option is also to study which coaching method prepares the competitors best to the competition. And further, does the participants who win get the best coaching or does the competitors' personal competences play an key role in order to win?

The competition could be improved in many ways by developing a year round hype around the competition. Sales is needed in any company so why not all fields of businesses are present as sponsoring the competition?

The sales meeting simulation could be transferred also to be a sales training in companies. Sales is a skill what anybody can learn and further it's useful in any situation in life. How would professionals make it? The test could be executed that they first do the sales meeting as they normally would do and after that the outcome would be analysed. With several rounds the participants could improve their score and gain new skills. Therefore one research question would be how much professionals could improve their performance in real life.

It would be also interesting to study what the competitors do after the competition, how their professional career has developed and how well they have used the connections from the competition in searching a job. As a conclusion there is many subjects how to develop this subject.

5.3 Self-evaluation and learning through the thesis process

The thesis writing process was a nice experience which however lasted longer what I had planned. I decided to go abroad and write the thesis in France since I was in my last year of university and had my own company to work on. That was a perfect way to combine studies, work and traveling. I got clarified my thesis subject early in spring and rushed on with the Best Seller and European Sales Competitions just before the summer break. The writing process was supposed to be ready already by the end of July and I almost succeeded with that goal.

It happened classically that I came back and started working in August which meant no time or energy for completing the thesis work. I had a new challenging position in my own company as the CEO and it took few months before I got it started again. Anyway I had a clear goal to graduate in December 2015 so I got the work done by that.

Independent work suits me well though there's always days that are not that productive but after all I felt the writing process quite easy. Working on distance abroad made own challenges because it was sometimes hard to find internet. That was crucial because I couldn't carry all material as books in my suitcase and the struggle was breaking my nerves. The competition itself was a great experience which I wouldn't miss if I had that

chance again. The subject was interesting to me and there was a lot of information and data to collect so I had no problem in writing the material.

I want to thank all people who supported me through the competition and the thesis process. Special thanks to my co-competitor Karla Vallila, our coaches Marika Alhonen and Piia Hautamäki and my friend and colleague Doris Tuohimaa for helping me out to “close” my thesis!

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